



Charter Schools Institute
State University of New York

Third Year Site Visit Report: Sisulu Children's Academy – Harlem Charter School

I. INTRODUCTION

The third year site visit is part of a comprehensive accountability system for New York State charter schools sponsored by the State University of New York Charter Schools Institute (CSI). The site visit during the school's third year of operation provides an independent assessment of the school's progress toward its academic and organizational goals as defined in its accountability plan.

The third year site visit complements the yearly reviews conducted by CSI staff and corroborates the school's own annual reports of progress toward the targets it defined in its accountability plan. The visit provides an independent assessment of the school's progress and provides recommendations to the school as it prepares to apply for charter renewal in its fifth year of operation. The recommendations represent the experienced opinions of the inspection team and are intended to offer the school guidance for enhancing the evidence base for its renewal application.

II. CONDUCT OF THE VISIT

The third year site visit to Sisulu Children's Academy –Harlem Charter School was conducted on May 28-29, 2002 by an independent team of experienced educators from SchoolWorks, Beverly, MA.

Dr. Karen Laba, Managing Partner, SchoolWorks

Nick Feldman, retired public school principal, SchoolWorks evaluation panelist

Dr. Robert Martin, former public school and charter school principal, SchoolWorks evaluation panelist

Anthony Pope, former alternative school administrator, teacher, doctoral student, Harvard Graduate School of Education, SchoolWorks evaluation panelist and writer

On May 29, Doug Lemov, Vice President for Accountability at the Charter Schools Institute, visited the school to monitor the process and assure that the protocol was being implemented as planned and that it was serving the needs for which it was designed.

The team used the school's accountability plan goals as the guide for their examination along with the set of framework questions included in the site visit protocol to assess the school's academic and organizational effectiveness. Prior to the one and a half day visit, the team reviewed the school's documents including its annual *Accountability Progress Report*, its original charter application, and reports from previous informal site visits by the Charter Schools Institute. At the school, the team interviewed school administrators, Board representatives, staff, parents, students, and visited classes to understand the efforts the school is making to achieve its

academic and organizational goals. The team offered a brief oral summary of its findings and recommendations to school leaders and invited them to ask for clarification as needed.

This report is organized into two parts. *Part I: School Progress Report*, offers the team's judgments about the school's effectiveness at meeting the broad goals defined in the charter school law (Education Law §2850(2) (a-f)):

- ? improving student learning and achievement ;
- ? increasing learning opportunities for all students (particularly students at risk of academic failure);
- ? encouraging the use of different and innovative teaching methods;
- ? creating new professional opportunities for teachers, school administrators and other school personnel;
- ? expanding parental choice in public schools; and
- ? moving from a rule-based to performance-based accountability system by holding schools accountable for meeting measurable student achievement results.

The judgments of the team are organized into the same three categories as the school's other documents: academic program, organizational viability, and unique programmatic areas. The framework for the progress report discussion is shown in **Appendix A**.

The second part of the report, *School Accountability Plan: Assessment and Recommendations*, reports the team's assessment of the quality of the school's own measures of its progress, and offers suggestions for enhancing the evidence base on which renewal decisions will be made at the school's fifth year of operation. A brief rationale for the inspection team's recommendations is presented in narrative form along with a summary table in **Appendix B**.

III. SCHOOL DESCRIPTION

Sisulu Children's Academy – Harlem Charter School opened in September 1999 with 247 students in grades K-2 in a building housing the Center for Community Enrichment, an organization sponsoring a number of community interest events. Enrollment rose to 327 for the 2000-2001 school year serving grades K-3 requiring the leasing of additional space for grades 2 and 3. When the current academic term began in September 2001, the school's enrollment of 308 students continued to occupy two sites.

To accommodate the increase in enrollment and the challenge of being housed in two facilities, the school limited its instruction to grades 1-4, maintaining loyalty to the students who started at Sisulu and wished to continue, and added new students into available spaces in the existing grades. The 115th St. building (CCE) houses grades 1 and 2, while students and teachers in grades 3 and 4 work at the Police Athletic League building. The leased space at the PAL location is a challenge, since other groups use the same rooms immediately following dismissal of Sisulu students, requiring teachers to secure all school materials before scheduled dismissal at 3:00 pm.

Sisulu Children's Academy is managed by Victory Schools, Inc., an educational management company with two other charter schools in New York. Victory Schools develops the budget, recruits and hires staff, and was primarily responsible for construction of the Sisulu

Accountability Plan. The Sisulu academic program is based on the Direct Instruction (DI) program for reading and mathematics, and the Core Knowledge (CK) sequence for science and social studies. The academic standards are aligned with the New York State Learning Standards.

The Sisulu mission proposes that it will become “one of the finest public schools in America” built on the philosophy that all children can learn. The mission declares that the school will focus on the core skills of reading, math and language by “offering more total time on learning, a higher degree of individualized instruction, and a highly innovative, research proven academic curriculum.” The selection of the core academic program elements (Direct Instruction and Core Knowledge) are intended to fulfill a large part of the Sisulu mission statement, while the plan to offer additional instructional time for all students with a longer school day was not continued beyond the first year.

Governance of the school is carried out by a Board of Trustees that meets six times per year. The Principal is based at the CCE building and serves as the overall manager of school operations, assisted by an Assistant Principal based at the PAL building. At the time of the visit, the Assistant Principal had been working part time due to disability and the Principal had been attempting to oversee both buildings on his own.

At the time of the visit, the school year was nearing its end, with the first group of Sisulu students having completed the final sections of the fourth grade New York State Assessments.

PART I: SCHOOL PROGRESS REPORT

I. ACADEMIC PROGRAM

Sisulu Children’s Academy has not yet met its academic targets for student achievement on standardized measures (Iowa Test of Basic Skills -- ITBS). The first group of Sisulu fourth graders just completed the New York State Assessments, making it impossible to judge performance compared to similar schools. Internal measures of student progress have been collected, but they have not been reported in a way that can allow the visiting team to judge the progress of individual students or to assess the progress of class groups, cohorts or relevant subgroups (special education, English language learners, etc.).

? To what extent have students attained expected skills and knowledge?

Due to the manner of reporting of the school’s assessment information, it is not possible to make an accurate judgment about Sisulu student performance. In the *Sisulu 2000-2001 Accountability Progress Report*, results on the ITBS have been reported as the percentage of students at or above the 50th percentile, a measure that limits the team’s ability to determine ranking compared with national norms among class groups or cohorts of Sisulu students. Questions were raised in information provided by the principal about the non-standard administration of the ITBS at Sisulu, which may make it more difficult to determine if Sisulu students are making adequate

progress from year to year. From the NCE* scores reported in the *2001 Accountability Progress Report*, Sisulu students generally perform below the national norm on the ITBS. Scores for classroom groups range from an average NCE of 24.4 to an average NCE of 58.35 on the total battery administered in May 2001.

Assessment information gathered as part of the Direct Instruction (DI) program in reading is comprehensive and collected weekly. In the school's August *2001 Accountability Progress Report*, student achievement is reported as the percentage of students completing "Mastery I" or "Mastery II" without clear explanation of the meaning of these rankings. It is difficult to judge whether this represents realistic achievement for the students, whether performance is distributed evenly across the range of possible 'levels' or whether Sisulu students are clustered at certain cut points on the measures. (The team has made several recommendations for enhancing the usefulness of its internal assessment data in Part II of this report.) According to the summary of the Direct Instruction results offered in the *2001 Accountability Progress Report*, 86% of grade 3 students are reading at or above 'grade level,' 67% of second graders attained or exceeded grade level, and 70% of first graders demonstrated mastery at or above grade level. Fewer Kindergarten students performed at that level by the end of the 2001 school year. The Direct Instruction assessment results differ significantly from the results of students at or above the 50th percentile on the ITBS.

In science and social studies, Sisulu has no external standardized measures of student performance on which to judge whether students are making progress toward the school's targets. According to the school's Accountability Plan, administration of the Core Knowledge Curriculum Reference exams is scheduled for every other year, and only the scores of students at Sisulu for two years prior to the test will be counted in the school's target. Sisulu leaders have not defined any intermediate benchmarks or internal assessments to complement the Core Knowledge test in these two subjects, giving the visiting team no data on which to judge the school's progress.

- ? What progress have students made over time in attaining expected skills and knowledge?

As noted above, questions have been raised about the administration of the ITBS tests that make it difficult to offer accurate judgments about the progress of the school's students over time. The ITBS has been administered in September and May of the first school year, and change in performance is reported on these two tests sorted by teacher in the *2001 Accountability Progress Report*. In that report, Sisulu students demonstrate a range of improvement during the course of the school year on the Total Test average, from less than one NCE point to more than 24.3 NCE scores. The students in one class showed a slight decline of 2.6 NCE points during the year. On the language battery, 10 of the 16 classrooms showed increases from September to May, two showed no change, and two declined. The same pattern holds for achievement on the math portion of the ITBS. Without additional information, it is difficult to say whether these changes represent progress among all students or within important student subgroups.

* Normal Curve Equivalent (NCE) is a standard score (a score that is expressed as a deviation from a population mean) with the lowest score being 1, the highest being 99 and the mean (arithmetical average) of 50. NCE's may be added, subtracted and averaged and may be used to represent how a student or group of students performed in comparison to the mean. For example, a drop in scores over time means the students are being passed by their peers nationwide and an increase in scores over time means that students are passing their peers nationwide.

During the site visit, a summary of the comprehensive Direct Instruction assessment tools showing growth over time in reading proficiency was shared by the Direct Instruction coordinator for Sisulu. As noted above, the progress results reported in the August 2001 *Accountability Progress Report* are difficult for the lay reader to interpret. The team offered recommendations to Sisulu leaders that results for DI be reported for relevant student subgroups over time, including special education and regular education students and those who qualify for free and reduced price lunch. While state education officials have not enacted new regulations, federal legislation has been passed that will require reporting of the progress of these subgroups by all schools in future years.

? Does the school's instructional program meet diverse students' needs?

As indicated in the school's charter application, the Direct Instruction model is the primary instructional model in use at Sisulu. As implemented at Sisulu, the design serves students in groups at a common pace and covers standard content for all. Assistant teachers are expected to provide secondary support for the classroom teacher and allow subgroups to have their needs addressed directly. As observed during the visit, teachers have modest skill at adjusting the pacing of lesson beyond the two major class groups. Many teachers commented that the behavior and learning needs of students is too diverse to serve effectively. Parents indicated their perception that the grades above K-1 need enrichment, particularly to address the needs of students for whom the pace of Direct Instruction is too fast or too slow. Interviews with teachers during the site visit indicated that, at the present time, special education services are not adequately providing for the academic needs of the large number of struggling students. Related services (occupational therapy, speech, etc) are meeting the needs as far as could be determined. Teachers asserted that there are more students with special challenges that have not been identified. All praised the efforts of the special education staff and social workers to meet the demands of Sisulu students, but they expressed concerns that staff was overwhelmed by the large population of needy youngsters.

One challenge faced by new students entering Sisulu is the difference in classroom procedures associated with delivery of the Direct Instruction model. School leaders indicated there are plans under discussion to hire additional staff to orient new entrants (students) to the DI instructional procedures and to "catch up" to their age mates. Sisulu modified its DI program significantly this school year to prepare the fourth grade for the NYS Assessments. The DI program was supplemented and time schedules modified to allow focused attention to the curriculum content tested on the state assessments. Teachers in other grades as well as the fourth grade have added a number of programs to supplement the DI math and reading to bring in more learning opportunities that include writing, creative thinking and problem solving skills. While the original DI model serves the needs of the some students, teachers comment that they have supplemented and supported the model with additional activities to serve the broad range of needs in their classrooms.

? Do the school's standards reflect implementation of high academic expectations?

The Direct Instruction model aims at a common learning level, emphasizing consistency from teacher to teacher and classroom to classroom as a key feature of its instructional methodology.

At Sisulu, teachers explained that they complemented the core program with additional activities to provide differentiated instruction to accommodate variations in student learning pace or style. When asked to describe what happens in a typical lesson, students in the focus group commented that some students are challenged by the level of work expected of them while others struggle to meet teachers' expectations, and still other students might become anxious to move ahead to more advanced work. During the site visit, the team noted some instances of higher order thinking activities in science and writing lessons, but they varied by teacher and were not readily available to all students in all classes.

There appeared to be high standards for student behavior, as the team observed classroom behavior that was generally on task and organized, creating a sense of order and purpose in the classroom environment. Teachers noted that not all days are as orderly as our visit revealed, and expressed concern about student safety, discussed in a later section of this report.

Maintaining high standards in the classroom requires efforts to maintain high standards among the teaching staff. Professional development activities offered by Sisulu are focused on the Direct Instruction model, and teachers feel confident that they can successfully implement the DI program as designed. However, teachers expressed frustration at the limited access to professional growth opportunities in other skills and content areas. The Core Knowledge curriculum elements, science and social studies, require extensive development of activities by teachers, and Sisulu faculty expressed concern for lack of time and assistance with these subjects.

II. ORGANIZATIONAL VIABILITY

Sisulu Children's Academy – Harlem Charter School has experienced modest variation in enrollment over its first three years, and is limited by facilities in the number of students it can accept. Systems to manage school operations are in place and appear to be functioning effectively. Less fully developed are systems to make use of student achievement data to monitor the effectiveness of the academic program and systems to monitor and improve the professional climate. Parents and students express strong support and satisfaction with the school and its service to the students.

- ? Is enrollment stable and sufficient to provide the financial foundation for the school?

Sisulu Children's Academy opened with 247 students in September 1999 (grades K, 1, 2), 327 in September 2000 (grades K-3), and 305 students in 2001 (grades 1, 2, 3, 4). The drop in enrollment between the school's second and third year is attributed by parents and teachers interviewed during the visit to a turbulent year with several teacher changes among the third grades. Enrollment overall is capped by the limits of available facilities. Currently the school occupies two sites, one for the grades 1 and 2, the other for the students in grades 3 and 4. To maintain continuity with the students it serves, Sisulu plans to offer grades 2, 3, 4 and 5 for the 2002-2003 academic year. The decision to add older students from the waiting list rather than bring in a new class of kindergarten or first graders raises concerns about adding students who are unfamiliar with the DI program. School personnel explained that new enrollees often have

difficulty adjusting to the structured approach of the DI curriculum, and the principal suggested that an additional staff person may be hired to serve as a coach for the new students at the upper grades until they become familiar with the DI routines.

In the *2001 Accountability Progress Report*, Sisulu did not report the reasons for student withdrawal during the school year or over the summer. Without such information it is difficult to project future enrollment trends or possible problems for future viability. Because of the changes in grades offered, the team is unable to rely on previous enrollment patterns to judge whether future enrollment levels will be maintained. Current waiting lists appear to indicate continuing support for the school.

? Does the school's financial management serve the needs of the students?

Since the start of operations, Sisulu has experienced deficits in its finances. The management company, Victory Schools, Inc., has not taken its contracted fee for services to allow the school to meet its essential obligations. Sisulu's budget is prepared by Victory with an emphasis on providing the Direct Instruction and Core Knowledge materials that are the core components of the academic program. School personnel (administrators and staff) are offered an opportunity to review the budget and provide feedback. Additional information on the budget process was not available from the new principal who began with the school after the current budget was established. Victory representatives indicated that the Sisulu budget parallels the budget of the two other schools Victory manages. During the site visit, there were comments from Sisulu staff indicating their perception that there are insufficient personnel to service the academic needs of the struggling students at Sisulu, and parents and teachers commented on the need for a nurse to address significant medication needs among the student population. Low salaries and insufficient training were cited by some staff members as reasons for the high turnover rate among assistant teachers. Because of the critical role of the assistant teachers in providing for instruction within the DI program, concerns about the quality and persistence of assistant teachers are significant.

Overall, the budget provides many of the material resources needed for the school's academic program, but does not appear to be able to provide the personnel needed to provide for the full range of student academic and non-academic needs.

? Are students and parents satisfied with the work of the school?

Upper grades students expressed praise for the teachers. Students praised the "strictness" of the school, indicating that the order and structure helps them concentrate on their academic work while at school. They also indicated that homework and activities that teachers have used to supplement Direct Instruction are enjoyable ways to learn. Some of the youngsters who appeared to be academically adept indicated that DI was "boring." Students also complained that, in the upper building, their desks are not their 'own' because the space is leased to another group after the Sisulu day is completed. Absence of a playground and the departure of some extraordinary teachers were two other dissatisfactions mentioned by the students in the focus group.

Parents expressed general satisfaction with Sisulu's efforts to educate their children. Special praise was offered for the class size, which remains below the sizes in neighborhood schools. From the parent's point of view, the presence of the assistant teacher in the classroom helps reduce the effective teacher-student ratio even further. Some parents who have had children in the school for several years noted that variations in classroom management skills among teachers have an impact on student's learning progress. Behavior and its impact on learning were factors that parents claimed contributed to the large number of withdrawals last year. They asserted that the previous administrator's slow response to lingering classroom management issues aggravated the earlier situation. According to the parents interviewed during the site visit, there are systems in place to allow them to provide feedback to the school, although parents admitted there is not widespread participation by parents in school activities. In the judgment of the inspection team, the survey provided by Victory Schools for parents, students and staff is limited and does not optimize the knowledge opportunity provided by the administration of a survey of parent and staff satisfaction. While the survey does employ the language used in the charter application, it offers limited insight into stakeholder perceptions and opinions.

? Are systems in place to promote the efficient operation of school functions?

Operations: Systems for managing school operations have been put in place by Victory Schools. Frequent visits by Victory personnel help the principal oversee facilities management, school safety, and purchasing and delivery of classroom supplies. The delivery of materials to classroom teachers has been problematic, as indicated in teacher interviews. Explanations from school personnel indicated that ordering followed the management company budget cycle which was not always coordinated with classroom needs.

Personnel: The school has a less well developed system for attracting and retaining teachers, for monitoring the professional climate at the school and for tracking reasons for teacher resignations. A high rate of turnover in previous years (and indications during the visit that high levels of resignation are likely for the current year) suggests that there are significant problems with the professional climate. As a result of this history, the inspection team judged that present strategies to recruit and retain quality staff do not appear to be functioning effectively. Concerns about the breadth and depth of professional development opportunities, faculty participation in decision making, and responsiveness to safety issues were noted by staff members as important factors in departure decisions. Instability among the teaching staff challenges the quality of the academic program since new teachers must be trained in the DI and Core Knowledge programs and are not as proficient in the curriculum's implementation as needed. On documents provided the inspection team at the time of the visit, of the 14 classroom teachers at Sisulu, eight are certified (5 fully, 1 conditionally, and 2 reciprocally with CT) and eight are noted as "no application on file." This is a large number of uncertified personnel and may present an additional challenge to the quality of the school's implementation of its academic program.

Discipline, Behavior management systems: According to teachers, there are major inconsistencies in the student discipline system at Sisulu. According to school documents, Sisulu adopted a standard code of conduct, but concerns have arisen about the ability of school leaders to promptly and consistently address seriously and persistently disruptive students. A number of assistant teacher positions were not filled at the time of the visit, leaving only one

adult in some classrooms with severely disruptive children. Teachers and other staff members brought their concerns to the attention of the visiting team, and these were relayed in general terms to the principal. Sufficient corroboration of their concerns from a variety of sources made their assertions credible. On the school's report of it behavior referrals to the state BEDS (Basic Educational Data System) forms, the categories for discipline referrals was marked "NA," giving the team little insight into patterns of behavior in earlier years.

- ? Are systems in place to monitor the effectiveness of the academic program and modify as needed?

Data management: The gathering and use of student performance information at Sisulu Children's Academy is incompletely developed. Student performance data is reported to the Charter Schools Institute and to the State Education Department, but there does not appear to be strategic use of standardized student achievement information beyond the DI weekly assessments to evaluate and modify the school's academic program. While recognizing that the school is in the early years of development of its academic program, strategies for critical review and modification of curriculum and instructional systems are not yet in place.

Academic review: The Direct Instruction system is monitored weekly by the Sisulu DI coordinator, a Victory Schools employee. She receives student assessment results and communicates with teachers if pacing of lessons or student progress does not meet expected targets. In previous years, Sisulu has contracted for an external assessment of its Core Knowledge implementation. However, due to a number of complications, there has been no external evaluation of the CK program this year nor has there been support from a Core Knowledge implementation consultant as in prior years. Teachers expressed dismay that these helpful support systems have not been available this year. Several staff members described their responsibility for assuring delivery of services to special education students, but their independent description of their roles and responsibilities did not reflect a systematic or comprehensive approach to monitoring services at the building level.

Communication and decision making: Teachers in both buildings expressed a lack of awareness of activities and events at the alternate facility. In separate focus group interviews, staff members expressed significant sense of separation and isolation from the key events at the school because of the physical separation of the two sites and infrequent conversations about school issues between the staff at each site. From April to June of this year, the PAL site has been without a full time administrator, aggravating even further their sense of isolation and separation. Across both sites, teachers reported little involvement in key school decisions, indicating their perception that their opinions are neither solicited nor respected. As noted in the previous discussion of professional climate, teachers cited lack of professional regard as one impetus for decisions not to remain at the school.

III. UNIQUE PROGRAMMATIC AREAS

Members of the Sisulu community understand that the core elements of the academic program are the Direct Instruction model for language and mathematics and the Core Knowledge program for science and social studies. Other elements of the school's

mission are less familiar to parents, students and staff. The school's progress toward achieving the full implementation of its unique programmatic areas – art and music appreciation, civic activities, and appropriate behavior – is mixed, with modest attention to art and music and behavior an important concern mentioned by parents and teachers.

? Is the school's mission and vision clear to all stakeholders?

The school's core curriculum models, Direct Instruction (DI) and Core Knowledge (CK), are clearly understood by parents, teachers, students, and school leaders as the defining feature of the Sisulu educational program. Also frequently mentioned by stakeholders during the site visit were the goals of providing a quality education to the children of the community and offering parents a choice of educational opportunities. Less frequently heard were mention of the creative aspects of the educational program described in the school's written mission statement and charter documents. Students mentioned their preference for the creative activities they encounter as part of the non-DI aspects of their class work, and parents suggested the school needed more work on enriching the program for students above grades K-1. Indirectly, these comments appear to reflect an awareness among students and parents of the innovative educational program described in the Sisulu original charter.

? “students will develop an appreciation for art and music” (*Sisulu unique programmatic area goal 1*)

The Sisulu charter describes special efforts to include rich art and music experiences in the educational program for all students. Currently, art at Sisulu is incorporated into the regular classroom content, and students illustrate writing assignments or science and social studies projects as examples of their art experiences. For music instruction, Sisulu has a well qualified full time teacher who provides vocal music and instrumental instruction (recorder) to all grades for a couple of periods per week. In the judgment of the inspection team, neither the art nor music programs as currently implemented appear likely to lead to a depth of appreciation as implied in the school's charter statement.

? “Students at Sisulu will demonstrate strength of character and concern for others by participation in class-wide and community-based civics projects and by demonstrating appropriate classroom and school-wide behavior.” (*Sisulu unique programmatic area goal 2*)

At Sisulu, visiting team members noted that class rules and school rules are posted in classrooms and around the building. Student behavior in classes and in common areas was orderly and respectful. Data gathered and reported by the school over a longer term was not sufficient to provide a more firmly grounded judgment about the school's progress toward student behavior and civic activities (see discussion in following section, Accountability Plan Recommendations). The tools used to survey parents', students', and teachers' opinions of school climate and student behavior are not detailed and broad enough to provide evidence to judge whether the school is meeting its behavior goals. The data forms submitted to the NYS Department of Education listing the number and types of instances of student misconduct are noted “N/A” for the 2000-2001 school year, leaving a gap in the evidence base for judging whether the school is meeting

its goals. In contrast to observations by the team on the day of the visit, teachers reported a number of concerns about instances of serious infractions of the school behavior code which were not consistently addressed. They expressed significant concerns for the safety of other students and themselves because of unclear and inadequate strategies for handling seriously disruptive students.

PART II: SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY PLAN: ASSESSMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The newest draft (4/24/2002) of the Accountability Plan for the Sisulu Children's Academy – Harlem Charter School was prepared by the school's management company, Victory Schools, Inc., for use by the three schools managed by the company. The 2002 draft differs in some aspects from the goals and measures referenced in the August 2001 *Accountability Progress Report* which describes the school's performance in the early years of its operation. The citations in this summary assesses the progress reported in the August 2001 document and recommends clarification and modification to the measures proposed in the revised 2002 plan. A summary table of the goals, measures and recommendations for the Sisulu Accountability Plan is included as **Appendix A**.

I. ACADEMIC PROGRAM GOALS

(goals and measures are quoted from the Sisulu Accountability Plan)

Goal 1: All the students at the [Sisulu Children's Academy – Harlem Charter School]* will become proficient in reading and writing of the English language.

Proposed measures:

- (1) improve reading by 3 percentiles per year on Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS);
- (2) students at Sisulu for 2 or more years will meet or exceed state standards on the New York State English Language Arts Assessment;
- (3) a greater percentage of students enrolled at Sisulu for 2 or more years will perform at or above level 3 on the NYS ELA than students in similar schools.

Goal 2: All students demonstrate competency in the understanding and application of mathematics computation and problem solving.

Proposed measures:

- (1) increase percentile rank by 3 percentiles per year on ITBS
- (2) meet or exceed NYS Performance Index
- (3) greater percentage of Sisulu students (at Sisulu for 2 or more years) will meet level 3 or above than students in similar schools

Goal 3: All students will demonstrate competency in understanding and application of scientific reasoning.

Proposed measures:

* The document available to the team referenced "Merrick Academy." Victory Schools personnel indicated that the goals applied also to Sisulu. The change inserted in this report uses the Sisulu school name.

- (1) 60% of students at Sisulu for 3+ years will perform at or above grade level on the Core Knowledge Curriculum Referenced Tests given in grades 1-6 every other year
- (2) meet or exceed state standards for the New York State Assessments
- (3) greater percentage of Sisulu students will perform at or above level 3 on the NYS Science assessment than students in similar schools

Goal 4: All students will demonstrate competency in the understanding and application of social, geographical, civic and world studies.

Proposed measures:

- (1) 60% of students at Sisulu for 3+ years will perform at or above grade level on the Core Knowledge Curriculum Referenced Tests given in grades 1-6 every other year
- (2) meet or exceed state standards for the New York State Social Studies Assessment
- (3) greater percentage of Sisulu students will perform at or above level 3 on the NYS Social Studies assessment than students in similar schools

ACADEMIC PROGRAM GOALS -- RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The analysis of student assessment results conducted for the school by its contracted consultant for the August 2001 progress report includes reports of (a) percent of students at or above the 50th percentile on ITBS for grades K- 3, (b) quartile analysis for ITBS for students in grades 1-3; (c) comparison charts of the percent of students at or above the 50th percentile for September and May administration of the ITBS; and (e) comparison charts for the September and May ITBS results by teacher using percentage of students at or above the 50th percentile, and by NCE score; and (e) comparison of days of teacher absence at Sisulu and similar New York city schools. The Charter Schools Institute has published guidelines for conducting analysis of student assessment results recommending that the school report its progress in absolute terms, in value-added terms, and in comparison to similar schools. To comply with the expectations of the Institute, Sisulu leaders and Victory personnel are advised to consider requiring that their consultant conduct future analyses of student progress to follow the recommendations in the Charter Schools Institute guidelines, including reporting NCE scores rather than quartiles or percentage over the 50th percentile.
2. The Sisulu principal mentioned discussion of plans to change assessments from the ITBS to the Stanford 9 norm referenced test in upcoming years and to change the frequency of administration of the assessments. The team strongly advises that the school consult with a testing specialist to consider the costs of changing assessment tools in the middle of the charter term. A change in tests limits the ability of the school to report student progress over time, a measure which will be required to support the school's request for renewal of its charter, and a measure recommended in the guidelines of the Charter Schools Institute. If the school changes assessment tools, it will limit the evidence it will have available to support its request for renewal.
3. During the site visit, the team learned that the school has been administering the ITBS in a non-standard pattern. Further research must be conducted to determine if the scores obtained by the school are reliable measures of longitudinal growth as required by the *Charter Schools*

Institute Accountability Plan Guidelines. The school is advised to consider clarifying the use of its norm referenced tools to confirm that they are applicable as required for tracking the progress of students over time.

4. In preparation for the requirements of new federal legislation requiring reporting of performance by student subgroups, Sisulu personnel and its management group might consider beginning to report the progress of special education students, English language learners, and those eligible for free and reduced price lunch as part of its regular yearly progress reports. New York State assessment results and norm referenced results (ITBS or Stan 9) are already reported to the school by subgroup. The school's efforts to report the academic progress of these important sub-populations will complement other reports of student performance and provide additional evidence of the effectiveness of its academic program.
5. Two of the three proposed measures in the 2002 Accountability Plan for Sisulu rely on the New York State assessments, given at the fourth grade. Due to a significant withdrawal of students from the current (and first) fourth grade class, there will be a small number of student results for the school to rely on as a baseline measure of its progress toward state standards. Because of the NYS assessment grade level schedule, at the time of renewal, the school will have only two grade level groups as evidence for its successful performance against its accountability plan targets. The school's renewal case would be enhanced if there were assessments measuring progress toward curriculum standards at more than one grade level. Interim internal assessments, such as those already in place to monitor progress toward Direct Instruction reading goals, might provide additional evidence of the school's efforts to move students toward proficiency if evidence of their standardized administration and scoring were included. According to the Sisulu Direct Instruction coach, data is gathered weekly on individual student progress and is collated and can be reported by class group and by relevant student subgroups. If the school can demonstrate that the Direct Instruction assessments are administered in a consistent and standard manner, Sisulu school leaders might consider adding reporting on this internal assessment to complement planned progress reports on the school's annual report.
6. Comparison with 'similar schools' is recommended by the Charter Schools Institute as one category of performance reporting for charter schools Annual Accountability Progress Reports. The New York State Education Department has a specified protocol for classifying schools by similar characteristics. School leaders and the consultants of the Sisulu Children's Academy might consider using the state's classification system for similar schools or show reasons why the state classification is not ideal.
7. During the site visit, staff members indicated scant familiarity with the Sisulu Accountability Plan or its specific learning targets and goals. Since student performance improvements rely directly on teachers' efforts to promote learning, schools which engage the faculty in meaningful discussion of the goals and measures of the Accountability Plan are better positioned to reach their performance targets. Sisulu leaders may want to consider adopting strategies to elicit teacher commitment to the school's goals and targets and develop ways to communicate interim progress frequently and clearly with both parents and staff.

8. A calendar of assessment dates for students at Sisulu, following the criteria listed in the Accountability Plan (e.g., students at the school for two or more years, three or more years, CK tests administered every other year), reveals that ALL assessments which will be used to measure the school's progress in preparation for charter renewal will occur in the fourth grade. The New York State Elementary Assessments in English Language Arts, Mathematics, and Science are given only at fourth and eighth grade. The results will be overloading the first group of fourth graders at Sisulu, a small (27) population of students, and little performance information about students in other grades. The school's Accountability Plan restrictions of students at the school for two or more years further limits the availability of achievement results, even from the ITBS, since the grade range at Sisulu is changing. The team recommends that Sisulu leaders and managers consider constructing a schedule of testing over the full charter term and make a critical examination of the quality and variety of data it will have available to provide evidence for its success at renewal time.
9. Since existing schools have taken the NYS Assessments for several years, Sisulu school leaders have access to the performance trends of students in these 'similar schools'. Knowledge of the exact target for Sisulu students can be informative when making program decisions and evaluating intermediate progress. Teachers, parents and students can offer helpful insights when they participate in examining achievement targets.
10. Since the Core Knowledge Curriculum Reference tests are designated in the newest Accountability Plan to be administered every other year at certain grades at Sisulu, there are no measures that can be used to track the performance of all students toward the Core Knowledge standards over the short term. In order for Sisulu to demonstrate progress toward its science and social studies goals, more frequent and comprehensive assessment information will be needed. For example, some schools use released items from state assessments to construct their own intermediate benchmark assessments to monitor academic progress in the off years.

II. ORGANIZATIONAL VIABILITY GOALS

Goal 1: The Sisulu Children's Academy – Harlem Charter School will maintain strong parental support and commitment to the school.

Proposed measures:

- (1) 70% of survey respondents will describe the academic program as "good" or "excellent"
- (2) during the year, maintain an enrollment equal or exceeding 90% capacity, and maintain a waiting list
- (3) average daily attendance greater than 90%

Goal 2: The [Sisulu Children's Academy – Harlem Charter School] will demonstrate strong organizational viability by maintaining sound financial practices.

Proposed measures:

- (1) actual and proposed budgets will show proper allocation of resources to ensure effective school programs
- (2) yearly balance sheets show fiscal soundness and adequate cash reserves
- (3) audited financial statements show responsible and prudent use of public resources

ORGANIZATIONAL VIABILITY GOALS -- RECOMMENDATIONS

1. To support the school's enrollment claims, Sisulu school leaders and managers might be well served to consider including reports of the number of continuing students for every year of the school's operations. Monitoring the specific students continuing at the school will inform the Charter Schools Institute's judgments about several of the Academic Program Goals described above, making it helpful for the school to have an accurate database for tracking both numbers and names of Sisulu students. Reporting the percentage of continuing students over time and clearly explaining any dramatic change in enrollment will provide helpful evidence of the school's efforts to recruit and retain students when the renewal visit occurs.
2. The survey used by Victory Schools to solicit the opinions of students, staff, and parents contains a modest range of items to allow the school to accurately identify attitudes across a number of important aspects of the school. The team recommends that the school consider adapting or adopting a more comprehensive survey tool, and that it report the results of its survey across a broad array of topics. The initial progress report submitted in August 2001 provided little evidence on which the Charter Schools Institute could base a judgment on parent, staff or student satisfaction. Disaggregated results showing the range of survey responses and the school's responses to the survey findings can enhance the Charter Schools Institute's understanding of the school's ability to make use of data from all sources and respond in positive ways to stakeholder input.
3. In addition to survey measures, Sisulu leaders might add to the evidence base on parent satisfaction by including in its annual Accountability Progress Reports the range of service and volunteer activities parents have contributed to the school, including such things as the number of hours contributed, the percentage of parents involved, and evidence of the impact of parents' contributions. Many schools find that active parent organizations are more than willing to gather and maintain records for the school's use.
4. The school's financial viability goals would benefit from elaboration and definition of key terms. The first measure refers to "proper allocation of resources." Without more specific definition, this term is open to varying interpretation. Some schools choose to define what to them is a "proper allocation" by naming the percentage of financial resources that will be budgeted toward classroom materials or professional development activities. The Charter Schools Institute will make final determination of what definitions will reflect appropriate use of financial resources.
5. Similar concerns about the precise meaning of the school's measurements arise in the use of the terms "effective school programs" (will this mean only student programs or will it also include adult programs?); "adequate cash reserves" (will the school consider a certain percentage or dollar amount to be 'adequate'? How should the Charter Schools Institute

understand what is ‘adequate’ for this particular school?); and “responsible and prudent” with public resources (what evidence will the school offer to demonstrate that it is using public resources responsibly and prudently? will the members of the Charter Schools Institute agree with the school’s definition?). To avoid confusion at the time of renewal, the school could consider clarifying its meaning of these terms and phrases as it completes its first progress report using the new accountability plan goals in the August 2002 Progress Report. A good policy is to continue use of the same definitions for each year remaining in the charter term.

6. One strategy that Sisulu might consider in reporting its financial viability is to demonstrate its allocation of resources to areas of student need identified in the school’s analysis of student performance. For example, budgeting for remedial or enrichment programs in response to parent surveys or student performance results is a powerful demonstration that a school understands of the needs of its constituents. Adjusting fund categories to recruit and retain quality teachers in response to competitive pressures can likewise reflect well on the school’s knowledge and reaction to changes in its own context. The team recommends that the school consider including in its yearly progress report descriptions of the decision making process that leads to the development of the yearly budget and its line item allocations, with particular emphasis on changes from year to year and the academic reasons for those changes.

III. UNIQUE PROGRAMMATIC AREAS

Goal 1: Students will develop knowledge and appreciation of art and music.

Proposed measures:

- (1) 70% of parents responding to a survey will select “good” or “excellent” regarding their child’s knowledge and appreciation of art and music

Goal 2: Students at Sisulu will demonstrate strength of character and concern for others by participation in class-wide and community-based civics projects and by demonstrating appropriate classroom and school-wide behavior.

Proposed measures:

- (1) 90% will participate in civic projects measured by writing and demonstration activities, portfolio of exemplary projects
- (2) 70% of parents responding to a survey will report “good” or “excellent” regarding their child’s growth in responsibility, self control and concern for others
- (3) 70% of classroom teacher rate behavior as “good” or “excellent”
- (4) 70% of Task Force participants will evaluate student behavior as “good” or “excellent”

UNIQUE PROGRAMMATIC AREA GOALS -- RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The use of a survey tool to measure student appreciation of art and music provides limited information about the art and music programs themselves or about student attainment of expected understandings. An adequate measure of progress toward this goal might include

more targeted measures of student knowledge and skills, along with parents' impressions of their child's progress. Reports of student participation in public music programs or displays of artwork around the community would enrich the school's yearly progress report, and demonstrations of a positive impact of these activities on the knowledge and skills of students would be helpful supporting evidence of progress toward this goal. The New York State Learning Standards for Music and the Arts can provide guidance for measurable outcomes for this goal.

2. The Accountability Plan suggests the use of rubrics for assessing the civics project portfolios and writing of students who participate in the school and community activities. In its 2002 Accountability Progress Report, the school might want to show samples of the rubric and describe a summary of the assessment results from the first group of work products examined using the rubric. For the Charter Schools Institute to judge the school's progress toward its "civic concern" goal, Sisulu leaders could provide the CSI with samples of student writing and portfolios as well as a comprehensive list of activities and the numbers of students who participate in each one.
3. Reliance on parent and teacher survey responses as the sole measurement of the quality of student behavior does not provide adequate information about this important aspect of school life. Student behavior information can also be reflected in the number of office referrals, detentions, suspensions and expulsions, information that is already requested and reported to the NYS Education Department on the BEDS forms. Sisulu leaders and managers can consider complementing their survey summaries in the Progress Report with a summary of behavior infractions and changes over time in the type and/ or severity of misbehavior.
4. As noted earlier, the surveys designed by Victory to acquire the opinions of parents and teachers about student behavior are limited in scope and are not likely to offer a rich basis of information from which school leaders can identify potential strengths and weaknesses within the school's programs. Sisulu leaders and managers can consider adopting or adapting survey tools, many of which are widely available, that can provide rich information that can inform their program decisions. Disaggregating results of a comprehensive survey can provide helpful guidance to school leaders as well as important evidence to the Charter Schools Institute at renewal.
5. In the *Accountability Plan Progress Report* for August, 2002, Sisulu leaders might consider including more detailed information about the Task Force described in measure 4 of Goal 2. Specifically, the school's report can explain who the members of the task force are, how they were selected, how they were trained, samples of the observation tool / rubric they used, full details of the task force assessment of school climate, and a discussion and analysis of the uses that will be made of the task force findings. This discussion, if school leaders choose to include it, will provide important supporting evidence for the school's renewal efforts.

CONCLUSION: As it moves toward renewal in its fifth year, Sisulu Children’s Academy – Harlem Charter School faces many challenges. Facilities limit enrollment expansion needed to provide funds for improvement. High turnover among faculty increases the need for additional training and instructional mentoring, placing immense burdens on school finances and the instructional leaders. Indications of poor morale among current staff raise serious concerns about the school’s continued viability. Without knowledgeable and skillful classroom instruction, improvement in academic achievement is not likely to proceed at a pace that will allow the school to meet the targets identified in its newly revised *Accountability Plan*.

The team’s review of the school’s new *Accountability Plan* revealed a number of areas where measurable outcomes are absent, and intermediate benchmarks have not been defined. The recommendations included in this report are those of the inspection team and are designed to assist the school and its management organization to develop a viable, useful accountability process that will guide decisions about budget needs, allocation of personnel and material resources, and setting realistic targets for academic performance that can be monitored efficiently and reported clearly to make the case for charter renewal. The challenge will be for Sisulu administrators and managers to prioritize school needs and collaborate effectively on efforts to meet those needs.

APPENDIX A: Framework for the Analysis of School Progress

Category	Criteria	Evidence Sources
Academic Program	To what extent have students attained expected skills and knowledge?	School's Accountability Plan and Progress Report(s)
	What progress have students made over time in attaining expected skills and knowledge?	School's Accountability Plan and Progress Report(s)
	Does the school's instructional program meet diverse students' needs?	Class visits, interviews, data review, Accountability Plan Progress Report
	Do the school's standards reflect implementation of high academic expectations?	Review of curriculum documents; confirmation of implementation by class visits
Organizational viability	Is enrollment stable and sufficient to provide the financial foundation for the school?	School documents Enrollment history
	Does the school's financial management serve the needs of the students?	Budget review, audit reports
	Are students and parents satisfied with the work of the school?	Interviews, survey review
	Are systems in place to promote the efficient operation of school functions?	Interviews, observations Staffing history
	Are systems in place to monitor the effectiveness of the academic program and modify as needed?	Personnel evaluation policies, minutes and agendas of board, staff meetings
Unique Aspects	Is the school's mission and vision clear to all stakeholders?	Interviews, document reviews
	Are the school's special programs meeting expected targets?	Accountability Plan, Progress Reports, other docs unique to each school

APPENDIX B: SUMMARY OF ACCOUNTABILITY PLAN RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SISULU CHILDREN’S ACADEMY – HARLEM CHARTER SCHOOL

I. Academic Program Goals

Goal 1: All student will become proficient in reading and writing of the English language	
Proposed Measures	Recommendations for the school to consider:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -- increase percentile rank by 3 percentiles per year on ITBS -- meet or exceed NYS Performance Index -- greater percentage of Sisulu students (at Sisulu for 2 or more years) will meet level 3 or above than students in similar schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -- analyze advantages and disadvantages of changing test type in the middle of the charter term --follow CSI guidelines for analyzing and reporting student performance results --identify “similar schools” and compare to NYS definition of ‘similar schools’
Goal 2: All students demonstrate competency in the understanding and application of mathematics computation and problem solving.	
Proposed Measures	Recommendations for the school to consider:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -- increase percentile rank by 3 percentiles per year on ITBS -- meet or exceed NYS Performance Index -- greater percentage of Sisulu students (at Sisulu for 2 or more years) will meet level 3 or above than students in similar schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (In addition to the recommendations for Goal 1) -- charting the progress of relevant student sub- groups in addition to aggregate results --supplementing NYS Assessment results with internal assessments to improve frequency and breadth of performance information
Goal 3: All students will demonstrate competency in understanding and application of scientific reasoning.	
Proposed Measures	Recommendations for the school to consider:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -- 60% of students at Sisulu for 3+ years will perform at or above grade level on the Core Knowledge Curriculum Referenced Tests given in grades 1-6 every other year -- meet or exceed state standards for the New York State Assessments -- greater percentage of Sisulu students will perform at or above level 3 on the NYS Science assessment than students in similar schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (In addition to the recommendations for Goals 1 & 2) --engaging faculty in the analysis and reporting of student performance --constructing an assessment calendar and assuring that assessments in science and social studies will be sufficient to demonstrate progress by a broad range of students at the school.
Goal 4: All students will demonstrate competency in the understanding and application of social, geographical, civic and world studies.	
Proposed Measures	Recommendations for the school to consider:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -- 60% of students at Sisulu for 3+ years will perform at or above grade level on the Core Knowledge Curriculum Referenced Tests given in grades 1-6 every other year -- meet or exceed state standards for the NYS Social Studies Assessment -- greater percentage of Sisulu students will perform at or above level 3 on the NYS Social Studies assessment than students in similar schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (In addition to the recommendations for Goals 1, 2 & 3) -- examining the performance of similar schools on the NYS assessments and setting intermediate progress benchmarks for Sisulu performance (in science and social studies as well as ELA and mathematics)

II. Organizational Viability Goals

Goal 1: The Sisulu Children’s Academy – Harlem Charter School will maintain strong parental support and commitment to the school.	
Proposed Measures	Recommendations for the school to consider:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -- 70% of survey respondents will describe the academic program as “good” or “excellent” --during the year, maintain an enrollment equal or exceeding 90% capacity, and maintain a waiting list -- average daily attendance greater than 90% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> --reporting continuing students for every year, showing change over time --explaining changes in patterns of enrollment --expanding/ enhancing survey tool to gather more detailed information --reporting survey responses in more detail --describing the school’s responses to survey results --adding participation information to survey results
Goal 2: Demonstrate strong organizational viability by maintaining sound financial practices	
Proposed Measures	Recommendations for the school to consider:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -- actual and proposed budgets will show proper allocation to ensure effective programs -- yearly balance sheets show fiscal soundness and adequate cash reserves --audited financial statements show responsible and prudent use of public resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> --defining “proper,” “effective,” “adequate,” “responsible,” and “prudent” in clear, measurable terms -- demonstrating allocation of resources to student academic needs, program modifications

III. Unique Programmatic Area Goals

Goal 1: Students will develop knowledge and appreciation of art and music.	
Proposed Measures	Recommendations for the school to consider:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -- 70% of parents responding to a survey will select “good” or “excellent” regarding their child’s knowledge and appreciation of art and music 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -- expanding survey tool to provide more detailed information --including measures of student attainment in progress report
Goal 2: Students at Sisulu will demonstrate strength of character and concern for others by participation in class-wide and community-based civics projects and by demonstrating appropriate classroom and school-wide behavior.	
Proposed Measures	Recommendations for the school to consider:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -- 90% will participate in civic projects measured by writing and demonstration activities, portfolio of exemplary projects -- 70% of parents responding to a survey will report “good” or “excellent” regarding their child’s growth in responsibility, self control and concern for others -- 70% of classroom teacher rate behavior as “good” or “excellent” -- 70% of Task Force participants will evaluate student behavior as “good” or “excellent” 	<p>(In addition to recommendations for Goal 1)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -- including reports of behavior code infractions (office referrals, detentions, suspensions, expulsions) for each year -- detailing “task force” membership, training, tools, and findings